

# CAN WE STILL HEAR THE CRO-MAGNON MAN?

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Steven Jones, of the University College London, has a memorable way of describing how we are not so different from Cro-Magnon how lived 28,000 years ago. He made the point that you might change seats if this man came along and sat next to you. However, the time interval projecting how different we are is two times less than the effective time that separated Europeans when they met Aborigines in Australia two hundred years ago. Anyway, in either cases behavioural differences are the big part of the evolution of our human nature.

We can go back where Cro-Magnon lived and have in some cases the possibility to look at individual stories in the “expression” of cognition, culture and cooperation. The question addressed here concerns:

- the rites of passage, essential for the perpetuation and the strength of the clan;
- body ornaments and feminine sculptures with fertility traits:
- cave decoration including an animal (horse) within the close circle of our ancestors' remains.

I simply sat on the ground with the back against the Balzi Rossi, the red cliffs at Grimaldi, overlooking the sea. The sun was rising toward the past. There I had to find that grey area that we have in us -- our common humanity. The waves were telling me that under the water lay the remains of the dead, waiting to be raised. Indeed, we could be able to go down and try to uplift our ancestors from the sea floor, because sea levels were substantially lower 28 000 years ago than they are today. During the Stone Age, coastal hunters sheltered in some of the caves from today's cliffs. And, because the dead are still with us, we can offer them a transformative trip, for better understanding, in the reverse form of the sort of fable called “Avatar”.



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“Natives are not alone and may come back against our rotten civilization”, is the formula given years ago by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). It is also the fairly offensive fable that James Cameron develops in “Avatar”, a film that offers a commentary on the history of humanity. The version isn’t exactly a surprise and everybody knows roughly what’s going to happen to the white hero, a guy who has the sentiment that civilized life looks a little dull, with ‘fast food’ and ‘reality TV’. The 3D glasses transport us into a majestic forest where we meet indigenous people, and make us conscious that we are complicit in destroying natural resources at an alarming rate. The natives, nobles savages, are intimately interconnected with the world around them, and are dependent on one another. In their easy way of living, bonded with nature, they evoke aboriginal people moulded by their environment and ecosystem.

The narrative of this adventure, using concepts from different cultures, arrived, from all of them in one form or another, at delivering intuitive symbols. Look at how the film reveals a tendency to paint (in blue) a classic portrait of natives who don’t wear clothes, as noble savages. The film also shows up the white cultural concept of progress that has conferred a willingness to dominate, coupled with the impossibility of seeing that humankind has become destructive.

A purpose of mythology is to bring humanity to function under one fire, but every age produces its own omnipresent history. The film pounds into our brains a dramatic inner life that creates a need to become an avatar in order to ‘connect’ with different species. Since the lifestyle of the species does not appear to be very different, despite all that an avatar embodiment requires, we are driven to the archeological problem of understanding the past, and especially the way of life of prehistoric humankind.

Prehistory is a science dealing with the understanding of humans living before written records --not only by gathering evidence and traces of past life in order to recover the collective memory, but to revive that life. To locate those humans in their natural history, archaeologists use dens from typical sites that perfectly define our humanity.

In the case of Modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*), who displaced Neanderthals in Europe and western Asia between 45,000 and 24,000 BP, the Grimaldi site helps in the understanding of the “symbolic explosion” heralding the Upper Palaeolithic behaviour of humankind. Natural cavities at the base of this cliff, having the Mediterranean shore at Grimaldi (Ventimiglia, Italy) have provided rock-shelters for humans, dating back to 300,000 years ago. Here, groups developed techniques and material equipment that were culturally distinctive, giving us the opportunity to see mankind in the same way as a biologist has the ability to see life, and to note similarities and dissimilarities with the living. Burial practices during the time of anatomically-modern humans (AMH) at Balzi Rossi have provided a number of well-preserved human remains. This burial record, coinciding in archaeological, environmental, and chronological contexts, allows the study of past hunters of animals that roamed the area, at that time unflooded, in front of the cliffs. The preponderance and relative abundances of ornamental and nutritive marine shells collected in the caves vary over time. The Gravettian layer, precisely defined by the AMH, dates probably from when the sea level was declining, and the vertebrate fauna present in the shallow cavity of the Riparo Mochi shelter, located between the Cavillon and Florestano caves in the Balzi Rossi, is the most terrestrially-oriented of the series studied by Mary Stiner (1999). Researchers think that it was a site for shellfish collection, but the industrial assemblage consists of typical hunting and day-to-day items. The landscape beneath was, according to the archaeologists, a rich habitat.

All foragers have broad-spectrum diet. However, the caves of the site with evidence of 15 well-preserved buried skeletons and their artwork, which encompassed both geometric and schematic style and a figurative image of a horse, are unique. In addition, small stylized figurines representing human females were found there (Borghese 1987).

As the days passed, the Lady laid there to become a statue of herself.



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She had been encased in an external coating of red hematite --armour that prevents the soft tissues from rotting away. The coloured corpse is telling us, “I remain among you”. She had to have been buried in this place as a memorial. Burial at a predetermined depth formed a bed in the sandy clay soil that prevented predators from attacking her. She had to continue to be the fountainhead of their energies, the key to providing evidence of an organized colony. The ceremony was performed after the body ornaments had been placed in position; the death of the Lady was a great challenge to face. Yet messages had to be created -- something with the corpse to pass down these signals. At Grimaldi, Palaeolithic people have offered us the opportunity, 28 000 years later, of examining the funerary practices and the rich cultural assemblages that provided the ornaments of the Lady who was discovered in the Cavillon cave.

The individuals discovered in the Balzi Rossi caves were taller than those of today. Similar skeletons have subsequently been found at the Cro-Magnon site, a rock shelter in the Vézère Valley in the Dordogne, in the famous village of Les Eyzies de Tayac. The term “Cro-Magnon man” refers directly to people very different from Neanderthals, and therefore they have an identity that prevents us from doing away with the complicated succession of tool kit evolution that makes up the archaeological phases of the Upper Paleolithic people.

Evidence from the Cavillon cave, where the red Lady was buried, tells that the burial took place during the Gravettian time, and demonstrates the technical skills of the phase. The Cro-



Magnons, like the Neanderthals, were seasonally-nomadic; however, the diversity of the resources exploited within the territory along the Grimaldi sea coast suggests a longer-term site within which a complex symbolic culture developed. The ornaments of the Lady, like the beaded cap and bracelet, are made from shells and other material such as red-deer canines ('pearl teeth' of *Cervus elaphus*). However, the presence of a shell-bead accumulation, closely tied to the deposition of stone artefacts and terrestrial resources, allows us to deduce that ornament usage was not confined to their graves. Furthermore, the contextual burial of the Red Lady, with variously arranged stones and a red pigment-coated animal bone, sited where a horse is engraved on the wall, indicates that the Cavillon grotto was a sanctuary cave.

To study the processes we must examine the scene more closely. The Cavillon cave is more like a rock-shelter; since it is not very deep.



©PF/B. Puech. The wall drawing is thus in full daylight and framing of the figure against the backdrop of the whole field gives the site its individual character (Vicino and Simone 1976). The practical intelligence of these prehistoric people is demonstrated mainly by the tools, the choice of area in which to live, and by site management. For Cro-magnon at Cavillon it is demonstrated also by the choice of engraving tools. The extreme delicacy of the horse design and the safe working technique in the handling of chisels to trace its outline, provide evidence of a developed artistic sense.

The outline of the horse creates a concrete symbol -- a primitive lower form of abstraction, which was necessary; for otherwise most people would not have understood the message. The key focus of Cro-magnon is fully integrated into the animal world, and the additional abstract signs formed by striations should not be confused with geometrical decorations. They emphasize the individualized nature of that horse, which is 'a genuine semantic system' designed to establish a communication. The language present within the Cavillon cave may be

considered as of magical nature, thereby offering an added level of interpretation to the meaning of the image. The hieroglyphic writing on Egyptian temple walls were readable, but people were sometimes not aware of an additional, magical, obscure meaning intended for the priests. Furthermore, the dead Lady and her resting place needed protection.

The very concept of drawing is one of the remarkable traits that are characteristic of Cro-Magnon. They invented a language of signs and figures. The 'vocabulary' of Palaeolithic art conveys ideas to communicate allegorical forms. The striations associated with animals are a concrete image necessary to be understood. This consistent pattern of revealing information of a shared cognitive representation shaped during the Palaeolithic period was lost with the evolution of mind --cognitive organization in individuals being the primary locus of culture.

We will never know who the Cro-Magnons were, but we are certain that special mortuary rites accorded to the Red Lady in the Cavillon cave certainly played an important role in their society. Based on the rock engravings in the Cavillon cave, this paper identified Cro-Magnon as being the creator of illustrated stories. The audible language of Cro-Magnon is formed by these testimonials. The components manifest themselves, they are mystics. Obviously the language and reality are related, but through their metaphorical character. The significance of the constituent parts of the Cave of Cavillon depends of how they are interpreted, were this not the case, talking would be futile.

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#### Figure captions

- 1- Vaults for the deads in Balzi-Rossi cliffs at Grimaldi (Italy).
- 2- Gravettian burial from the Cavillon Cave.
- 3- Cavillon Cave, depiction of a horse in profile..